

Neighboring Food Co-ops: A Decade of Collective Impact

BY ERBIN CROWELL

From healthy food to organic agriculture, from fair trade to building stronger local economies, from good jobs to renewable energy, food co-ops have been pioneers—empowering people to work together to make the world a better place. At the same time, food co-ops have not always been proactive in working together to measure and communicate our collective impact, communicating our difference in a competitive marketplace, and leveraging our shared strength. Regional collaboration offers an opportunity and strategy for pooling resources, achieving scale, and sharing ideas and innovations.

The foundation of NFCA

With this in mind, a group of managers and board members from food co-ops that would later form the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) first met in 2004 to explore closer collaboration. In 2007, this group gathered in Vermont and approved the Middlebury Manifesto, agreeing to work collaboratively to “further the ideals of democracy, cooperation, autonomy and education as enshrined in the International Co-operative Principles.” The document goes on to state the intent of participating co-ops to “provide occasions for collective action to build a co-operative economy in our geographic region.”

Building on this momentum, a representative steering committee was established, and the group then embarked on a process of scenario planning in which it explored potential outcomes of recent trends in the economy, culture, and politics of the region. But before determining where they wanted to be in the future, these co-ops wanted to understand where we were in the present. These co-ops hired independent economic analyst Doug Hoffer to undertake a survey of member co-ops in Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut to collect and analyze data about their impact on the regional economy. The study revealed a powerful but untold story of the shared impact food co-ops were already having.

For example, the 17 co-ops included in the original study were surprised to learn that they had a combined membership of 64,000 people and aggregate annual sales exceeding \$161 million. Further, these co-ops also had a dramatic impact in the regional economy, including local purchases of more than \$30 million and over 1,200 employees. In Vermont, food co-

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ops collectively were among the top 25 employers in the state.

Co-op impact a decade later

In 2018, the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) conducted a survey of the co-ops that participated in the original study to better understand what had changed over the past decade. In the wake of the global recession and dramatically increased competition, how had these food co-ops fared? What impact have they had, together?

While one of the 17 co-ops that participated in original study had closed its doors, the total number of storefronts grew from 22 to 24 as existing co-ops have opened additional locations to serve new communities. Even more compelling was the growth reported ten years later by the remaining 16 co-ops. For example:

- Membership increased by 38 percent, from 64,000 to more than 88,000—demonstrating growing interest in cooperative enterprise.
- Shared revenue grew 39 percent, from \$161 million to over \$224 million.
- Sales of local products grew 23 percent, from an estimated \$52.4 million to \$64.7 million.
- Employment grew 20 percent, from 1,240 to 1,485.
- Staff wages grew 69 percent, from \$28.6 million to almost \$48.3 million—reflecting the commitment of food co-ops to sustainable jobs.

These results helped shed light on the power of food co-ops in the region and the enormous potential of working together. These 16 co-ops alone don't tell the whole story. As the NFCA as a whole has grown, so has our collective impact. The association now includes over 35 food co-ops and start-up groups across all six New England states and New York State, with six new co-ops opening their doors in the past ten years. These businesses are locally owned by more than 144,000 members and employ over 2,300 people. Together, they generate shared annual revenue of \$330 million, including sales of \$90 million in local products.

Collaboration for innovation

In addition to these numerical impacts, collaboration has had other less tangible but meaningful effects. A priority has been the development of pilot projects to test the viability of regional sourcing to increase our support of regional producers

and support our competitive advantage. To date these efforts have focused on two projects, one promoting local artisan cheese makers and another our own line of frozen fruits and vegetables. This year, Suzette Snow-Cobb, who had served as a member of the management team at founding NFCA member co-op Franklin Community Co-operative, was hired to coordinate these efforts and begin planning for future priorities.

“As a participant in the early days of the NFCA, it was hard to imagine where we would be in 10 years,” says Snow-Cobb. “But it was clear that our co-ops needed to be working together to address the gaps in regional sourcing and continue to differentiate ourselves in the ever-increasing competitive market, and I am happy to be part of that effort.”

By working together, our co-ops have been able to raise their profile in our region through collective advertising and event sponsorship. For example, the NFCA is a sponsor of the Northeast Organic Farming Association summer conference, where for the past five years we have organized a track of workshops, panels, and film showings on co-ops. The conference track is planned in collaboration with regional cooperatives and organizational partners.

Another example of our collective impact is collaboration with the University of Massachusetts–Amherst Department of Economics and the Valley Association of Worker Co-ops to create one of the only undergraduate certificate programs in cooperatives. Launched in 2010, the Certificate in Applied Research in Cooperative Enterprise includes hands-on internships, enabling students to gain firsthand knowledge of cooperative enterprise while bringing a new perspective. For example, in addition to helping our co-ops quantify impact data and helping out at our annual meeting and other gatherings, many of our interns have focused on topics of co-ops and social media, engaging youth, and diversity and inclusion.

Healthy Food Access and “Co-op Basics”

In 2011, when the impacts of the global recession were becoming clear, the NFCA worked in collaboration with Co-op Fund of New England, Farmers Union, and Hunger Free Vermont, to launch its “Food Co-ops and Healthy Food Access” initiative. Recognizing the growing challenge of food insecurity in the Northeast, the NFCA reached out to community organizations to better understand the issue and to develop strategies for making healthy food more accessible to people on limited budgets. This resulted in a coordinated



NFCA 3rd annual start-up workshop day, in collaboration with Food Co-op Initiative and hosted by Monadnock Food Co-op.

strategy promoting “Co-op Basics” programs among member food co-ops (now a program of National Co+op Grocers) and “Food for All” initiatives designed to make healthy food more affordable to shoppers on food assistance. Significantly, our efforts focus on the key cooperative difference of member-ownership, increasing access to participation as a tool for economic improvement.

Following this work, 13 NFCA co-ops now have “Food for All” programs and report significant increases in membership as a result. In addition, these efforts to understand how we can be more representative of our communities have supported a deeper dialogue on diversity and inclusion among our co-ops. This dialogue has been carried forward at recent annual meetings and in an October 2018 Co-op Café, co-hosted by the NFCA and called, “Expand the Vision of ‘We.’”

These dialogues have been particularly relevant to food co-op start-ups in our region, many of which are organizing in more urban communities and have food security, diversity, and inclusion as central to their founding purpose. In addition to providing forums for exchange with existing co-ops and service providers, the NFCA works to ensure that start-ups don’t have to go it alone in establishing a successful new food co-op. Member Programs Manager Bonnie Hudspeth, former project manager for Monadnock Food Co-op, convenes coordinated calls with start-ups organizers to share challenges and ideas.

Key to our impact in supporting start-ups in our region is our partnership with Food Co-op Initiative (FCI). FCI staff have been regular contributors to our regional gatherings and participate in our twice-monthly peer-group calls to provide technical assistance and valuable resources to our start-ups. “Whether providing grants, resources, trainings, technical assistance or other services to start-ups, FCI has been a key partner for the NFCA and our member co-ops,” says Hudspeth.

By working together, our co-ops have been able to provide a space for ongoing relationship building among managers, staff, and board members, as well as partner organizations and other



Healthy Food Access peer audit at Green Fields Market (Franklin Community Co-op). Andy Grant (board member, Franklin Community Co-op), Erbin Crowell (NFCA executive director), Bonnie Hudspeth (NFCA member programs manager), Sarah Kanabay (marketing manager, Franklin Community Co-op), Maria Infante (Project Bread), and Ellie Kastanopolous (member, Franklin Community Co-op).

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co-op sectors. In addition to annual gatherings that include presentations, panels, and workshops, the NFCA has organized department-specific peer training events where representatives from various co-ops can network, share ideas, and explore innovations together. Recent examples have included peer trainings for produce, marketing, and finance personnel.

At this year’s peer training event, nearly 60 board members from co-ops across the Northeast got together for a rare opportunity to gather independently and share ideas on participant-identified topics including “Member Engagement Strategies that Work,” “Successful Board Recruitment and Retention Strategies,” and “The Challenges and Rewards of Diversity and Inclusion (or Honoring Co-op Vision/Mission).”

Federation, collaboration, innovation

Regarding the 6th Principle of the Cooperative Identity, “cooperation among co-ops,” the International Cooperative Alliance Guide states that, “secondary cooperatives, which are cooperatives whose members are primary cooperatives, [act] as a place to share knowledge and resources, and to support cooperatives independently and collectively.” The NFCA is proud to be just that: a regional cooperative of food co-ops.

In this sense, the NFCA is a mechanism for local collaboration and a complement to national associations such as National Co+op Grocers and cross-sector organizations such as NCBA–CLUSA. By pooling our assets—financial, intellectual, and strategic—we are better able to support the success of individual co-ops, engage shoppers, policymakers, and activists, and demonstrate the potential of co-operative enterprise on the local level.

“The NFCA is owned by its member co-ops, governed by an elected board of directors made up of managers and board members, and is guided by a vision of collaboration,” states the board president, Faye Mack, who also

serves as board president of City Market/Onion River Co-op in Burlington, Vermont.

“By coming together to learn from one another, challenge one another, and support one another, all within the structure of a cooperative, we can direct and grow the food co-op model throughout our region and have a bigger impact than each of our individual member co-ops could alone.”

Ten years after our first impact study, the NFCA has been able to leverage collective resources for shared impact, mutual support, organizational partnerships, and innovation. As our co-ops look to the future, collaboration will be key to our success in achieving the vision of a more fair, sustainable, and inclusive food system and economy that works for everyone. •

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